Cowboys in Hyperspace: A Marxist-Postcolonial Reading of Cormac McCarthy's *The Border Trilogy*

Research Thesis

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by

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Introduction / Retrospect

Cormac McCarthy's *The Border Trilogy*, comprised of *All the Pretty Horses (1992), The Crossing (1994),* and *Cities of the Plain (1998),* is a story about American cowboys set in the 1950s, during a time when the cowboy way of life had long since passed; the characters attract stares in public places because of their wildly outmoded dress, they ride their horses across paved highways, and maintain their vagrant, lone-ranger lifestyles by subsisting on groceries bought at the supermarket, or food ordered in diners. The *Trilogy* is a prime example of the postmodern collapse of the distinction between high and low culture, taking the classic Western genre as perpetuated by popular culture and appropriating it, rewriting the conventional formula for artistic purposes. If I had to describe the books in just a few words, I would call them understatedly funny, tragically epic, and inexhaustibly complex.

One of the first things I was taught as an English major was that in order to effectively analyze a text, one must consider the narrative's relation to time and space. Indeed, time and space comprise the two intersecting planes of all human experience. I first read McCarthy's *The Crossing* as an AP student in high school, before college, before I was taught to think about narrative critically in this way, and I remember being blown away by it in a purely visceral sense. I read the rest of *The BorderTrilogy—All the Pretty Horses* and *Cities of the Plain*—on my own time, and was equally blown away by them. Underpinning my fascination with the books was the sense of having been rather mystified by them; I remember very clearly the experience of reading *The Crossing* at 17, the feeling of being lost—I was never at all sure of *when* or *where* I was in the narrative; I felt, somehow, like I was never really grounded temporally or spatially, like I was free-floating through the story. I also remember, importantly, a

distinct disjointedness in my perception of the story's temporality; I felt like the world of *The Crossing* did not match up with my own perception of what the 1930s-50s were really like, particularly with regards to Mexico. *There were at least cars and electricity back then, right?So, like, where are they?* I had, in other words, the uncanny feeling that I was somehow in an age that, to my mind, actually dates back *farther* than just a few mere decades ago. So, on a very basic level, I suppose I chose to do my senior thesis on these books simply because I really liked them, yet never felt like I fully understood them. In doing so, I was able to engage in a dialogue with my self of three or four years ago, such that the project has, in fact, become important to me on a fairly personal level. I was a rather angsty and disillusioned teenager at the time of my first encounter with these books, and I suppose what I discovered through my work on this project is that, at the end of my college career, I very much find myself still living in the echoes of that angst and disillusionment, which, I think, may be said to permeate the subtext of this entire analysis.

But forgoing the personal and turning, now and most relevantly, towards the intellectual, I was able to apply my new *college-educated* way of thinking critically about narrative time and space in order to draw conclusions about *The Border Trilogy* that I was not even able to fathom three or four years back. I found, imperatively, that that feeling of being lost—the feeling which marked my first reading of the *Trilogy* in high school—is, at least to my thinking, intentional on McCarthy's part; *that's the way you're* supposed *to feel when you read these books*. And if it is not intentional, there is, beyond a doubt, certainly an identifiable material basis for the kind of spatial and temporal disorientation/dislocation that so characterizes the *Trilogy.* And it is *this* notion that actually permeates the subtext of this thesis—indeed, it is the crux of my entire analysis.

My interest in geography, developed in the latter half of my undergraduate career, has guided me toward making this conclusion (and it is this interest which has also, apparently, made me something of a Marxist). With that in mind, it almost goes without saying that much of the work I have done here is highly indebted to David Harvey's theorizing of postmodernity, particularly with respect to his concept of *time–space compression.* The phenomenon of time–space compression, a concept central to this analysis, refers to the total collapse of time horizons and simultaneous annihilation of spatial barriers in the wake of global capital flows, as mediated through global information-technology systems. When we are subjected to this kind of time–space compression, Harvey argues, it often becomes hard to tell exactly *where* or *when* we are—the exact disorienting effect that one experiences when reading McCarthy's *Trilogy.*

It is Harvey's overarching thesis that neoliberal capitalism has created the conditions for time–space compression to occur as it does:

> Accelerating turnover time [or, the *rate of profit*] in production entails parallel acceleration in exchange and consumption. Improved systems of communication and information flow, coupled with rationalizations in techniques of distribution, made it possible to circulate commodities through the market system with greater speed. Electronic banking and plastic money were some of the innovations that improved the speed of the inverse flow of money. Financial services and markets (aided by computerized trading) likewise speeded up, so as to make, as the saying has it, 'twenty-four hours a very long time' in global stock markets (Harvey 285).

Thus we have the material-economic base for time–space compression, and thus for the feeling of free-floating disorientation that characterizes (post)modern life.

My task in this analysis of McCarthy's *Border Trilogy,* then, is to explore, in the fundamental materialist tradition, the dynamics of the base–superstructure exchange: In what

way does the *Trilogy* follow the "cultural logic" of neoliberal capitalism (to quote Frederic Jameson's seminal thesis on postmodernism)? How do postmodern conceptions of time and space, in other words, infiltrate the narrative, and what are the effects of that infiltration upon the characters'—or, indeed, upon the readers'—perceptions of the events that take place in the story? In answering these questions, I begin in Chapter 1 by considering the *Trilogy's* position within the larger Western genre, exploring the ways in which McCarthy aligns, departs, or rewrites the conventions of the mythic American West, particularly with respect to a conception of (American) history. I then move on to an intensive consideration of postmodern spatial representations in Chapter 2. Finally, in Chapter 3, I explore the function of myth in the *Trilogy*, and the effect it has upon the characters' motivations.

Chapter I

The Virtual West Versus the Real West

In engaging with McCarthy's version of the American Western, the distinction must first be drawn between what I shall call the *virtual* West—that is, the West as it exists in cinematic fantasy—and the *real* West—or, the West as it was for those who lived through its history.

I. The Virtual West

Our postmodern world is one characterized by an unprecedented onslaught of ephemeral images and visual stimuli, largely attributable to the burgeoning advertisement, television, and film industries—the engines of the commodification of spectacle—which have flourished under the conditions of neoliberal capitalism. As such, if we mean to come to terms with the fantastical nature of this virtual West, so as to distinguish it from the *real* West, we must first consider the image—*the* distinctive neoliberal commodity—since it is through the vehicle of image production that the virtual West was born.

To begin, it can be said that the face of neoliberalism has always been, in some strange way, the face of an American cowboy—a *virtual* cowboy epitomized by Ronald Reagan himself. This is to say that Reagan's cowboy image was pre-established and familiarized in the American public sphere by the time of the presidential nominations in 1980, having starred in numerous B-movie Westerns throughout the 1940s and 1950s. As such, his Hollywood notoriety was practically begging to be exploited, and orchestrators of Reagan's presidential campaign were quick to capitalize on and inflate the image of Reagan-as-cowboy: every aspect of the famed campaign poster "Bedtime for Brezhnev," for instance, calls attention to Reagan's status as an

ex-movie actor, from the title alone (a spoof of 1951's B-movie comedy "Bedtime for Bonzo") to the depiction of Reagan himself garbed in his cowboy best and accosting Russia's unwitting General Secretary by the collar of his shirt.

The significance of this is not marked so much by this appeal to the national myth itself, since presidential campaigns from William Henry Harrison's in 1840 to Theodore Roosevelt's in 1900, and beyond, have also drawn heavily on their candidates' frontier associations to secure their respective victories. With respect to Reagan's campaign, the shift is instead marked by the underlying reality (or unreality) of the association. Roosevelt's evocation, for instance, as "The Rough Rider" frontiersman was grounded in a certain sense of historical factuality; that of "his actual deeds as a stockman, sheriff, and Rough Rider" (Slotkin 644). Reagan, on the other hand, had no claim to such legitimacy; his role as a cowboy was just that—a cinematic *role* performed in cinematic space; indeed, a *virtual* cowboy for a virtual West. Reagan's illegitimacy by itself, however, is perhaps not as significant as the fact that *it did not actually seem to matter* to the American electorate; the tactic worked andthe image alone thereby became an acceptable surrogate for authenticity. Indeed, the fantasy of Reagan-as-cowboy still lives on today. History, then, becomes reified as an image, and herein lies the paradigm shift, the visible culmination of Benjamin's concept of aestheticized politics wherein the "myths produced by mass culture have become credible substitutes for actual historical or political action" (Slotkin 644).

In light of this particular aspect of what Slotkin calls the "recrudescence" of the American myth in the neoliberal age—the creation of a virtual West wherein cinematic fantasy becomes a stand-in for historical authenticity—the question then arises as to McCarthy's level of complicity in it: does the *Border Trilogy* offer up a critique signaling a movement *beyond* virtuality, or is it, in the last instance, merely complicit in the reification of history as an image? We shall start by

exploring the extent to which the latter possibility holds true. To be sure, the three novels comprising McCarthy's *Border Trilogy* were all published well into the neoliberal era, over a span of six years in the 1990s; as such, the novels already presuppose a readership of image junkies and cinephiles preconditioned to the notion of this virtual West. They also presuppose an American author who is presumably an active participant in that selfsame culture and who is, therefore, not to be held exempt from those selfsame qualifiers (the fact that *All the Pretty Horses* was turned into a Hollywood film directed by Billy Bob Thornton in 2000—despite its being something of a box-office failure—even corroborates this assertion). This is all to say that McCarthy's *Border Trilogy* cannot fully escape the imagized world we inhabit; the *Trilogy*, rather, is in many ways a direct emanation of that very world, in that the works themselves are highly imagistic narratives—to the extent that they seem at times to even be self-aware of it.

This notion can be engaged most readily by a discussion of the use and effects of imagery throughout the novel. McCarthy's use of imagery is curiously idiosyncratic, in that it gives rise to a kind of cinematographic prose which can ultimately be viewed in two ways: both as a deliberate way of calling attention to its derivation from a genre usually corresponding to film (as a metafictional ploy, in other words), and as something more systemic and unconscious—the inevitable output of a literary author who inhabits a postmodern world saturated by images in the form of film and television, images so deeply ingrained that his prose starts to unconsciously mimic the logic of cinematography itself. Indeed, the cinematic influence is quite glaring: The way the sun rises or sets at certain points throughout the *Trilogy*, for example, reads like a time-lapse shot in film, wherein the temporality of some taken-for-granted occurrence (moving traffic, a blooming flower, or indeed, a rising sun) is subjected to a speeding-up in the editing process, such that the viewer experiences the entire phenomenon before his eyes in a matter of seconds.

An instance of this kind of imagery—its literary translation—can be seen in *The Crossing* when Billy and Boyd are on their way to Casas Grandes, seeking out the horse-trader Soto who has dealt with their parents' stolen horses. One morning they rise and ride out along "the eastern rim of the escarpment," where they stop their horses and watch the horizon "while the sun [balloons] like boiling glass up out of the plains of Chihuahua to make the world again from darkness" (Crossing 190). For readers, the sentence operates on two levels: at the level of narrative, it is understood that in order to see the sun rise in its entirety the brothers must have been sitting along the escarpment for quite some time, but at the level of readership (corresponding to the level of the viewer in cinema), the sun rises in the amount of time it takes to read the sentence from beginning to end, thus imitating the kind of fast-forward effect achieved by the time-lapse shot.

Just as temporality in McCarthy's work undergoes speeding-up in this way, so too it undergoes slow-motion, a technique common to the Western genre of film (of which *The Wild Bunch*is widely considered to be the exemplar). Indeed, there are two explicit scenes of slow-motion in *All the Pretty Horses* and *The Crossing*, both of which seem to mark the onset of events which are highly consequential to the novels' respective plots and both of which are also scenes of violence (which is, needless to say, another trope of the Western film genre and whose function in these novels necessitates a longer discussion which I will return to later). One of the more thrilling scenes in the entire *Border Trilogy*, for example,occurs in the prison at Torreón with the knife-fight between the "cuchillero" and John Grady in the mess hall. In the moment of clarity just as John Grady realizes he is about to be attacked, both time and motion suspend themselves briefly: "John Grady saw it all unfold slowly before him. The tray coming edgeways toward his eyes. The tin cup slightly tilted with the spoon in it slightly upended standing almost

motionless in the air and the boy's greasy black hair flung across his wedgeshaped face" (Horses 199). Here then, the temporality of a tray being swung through the air, which in real-time would occur almost too quickly for anyone to visually comprehend, is drawn out to signal the first of two occasions in John Grady's life in which he would be driven to commit homicide. This same slowed temporality is pushed even further in *The Crossing,* in a scene reminiscent of the "bullet-time" sequences of *The Matrix,* supposedly an innovation of the Wachowski brothers, but in fact anticipated by McCarthy. In this scene, time is slowed to the point that an actual rifle bullet is slowed down so that it may be conceived of visually, and whose pathway is consequential since it travels through the chest of Billy's younger brother, Boyd: "Billy knew afterward that he had seen the actual riflebullet. That the suck and whiff at his ear had been the bullet passing and that he had seen it for one frozen moment before his eyes with the sun on the side of the small revolving core of metal, the lead wiped bright by the rifling of the bore" (Crossing 270). Again, that the temporality of the *Trilogy* is capable of being manipulated in such a way can ultimately be viewed in two ways: As a metafictional device speaking to its origins in a genre of film and thus as a work of fiction—imagistic, filmic, dream-like—*and* as a greater extension of cultural logic—in other words, the neoliberal age is the only age in which such a temporality *makes sense,* both to the cinephiliac writer and reader alike.

II. The Real West

Returning to the question of McCarthy's complicity in the propogation of the virtual West, we have seen, then, that McCarthy's West is, at least to some degree, also characterized by virtuality: The narrative is replete with images subject to cinematographic temporalities and editing (speeding up and slowing down). With that in mind, we now turn to the other possibility–

–that of McCarthy's divergence from virtuality towards something more like the *real* West, or the West as it was experienced by those who have lived through its history, beyond the realm of cinematic fantasy. In doing so, we return to the idea of cinematographic prose, this time not with respect to imagery but with respect to McCarthy's cowboys themselves. While Reagan's cowboy persona, when approached critically, is ultimately rendered depthless due to a complete lack of historical truthfulness *in practice* to reinforce it, practice alone is in many ways absolutely central to the characterization of McCarthy's cowboys, specifically the type of practice referred to as *labor.* If nothing else, cowboys John Grady Cole and Billy Parham are *laborers*, and McCarthy's careful and painstaking articulation of work, or labor, at certain instances throughout the *Trilogy* seems to lend itself this kind of characterization. We see an example of this when John Grady and Rawlins first arrive at the haciendain *All the Pretty Horses,* upon which John Grady undertakes the task of taming sixteen wild horses in the course of four days as a way of demonstrating his competency to the hacendado:

> He held the mecate while Rawlins undid the sideropes from the hackamore and knelt and tied them to the front hobbles. Then they slipped the hackamore off the horse's head and John Grady raised the bosalea and gently fitted it over the horse's nose and fitted the mouthrope and headstall. He gathered the reins and looped them over the horse's head and nodded and Rawlins knelt and undid the hobbles and pulled the slipnooses until the siderope loops fell to the ground at the horse's rear hooves. Then he stepped away (Horses 107).

Mimicking the way in which the cinema edits and cuts together multiple images in order to convey action, this passage stands in as one among many scenes of detailed action-narration wherein the practices themselves serve to legitimate and demonstrate the characters' competencies as laborers and thus as actual cowboys. The parlance, in this case, even adds to this

effect: the more unusual nouns like “hackamore,” “headstall,” and “bosalea” are understood by the reader as belonging to a particular trade or lifestyle that is not widely accessible or familiar (that of ranching, specifically). This emphasis on labor in *The Border Trilogy* with respect to its main characters ultimately signals a movement beyond the image and is perhaps the most important way in which McCarthy seeks to rewrite the conventional Western.

Apart from emphasizing labor, the characters’ actions also serve another important function, a function which can be located specifically in the *modernism* of postmodernism and which consequently calls for a somewhat longer discussion. By the “*modernism* of postmodernism,” I mean to say that McCarthy appropriates older modernist techniques in the construction of his narratives and here, of course, I am referring to Hemingway and Faulkner in particular—two canonical modernists regularly mentioned in connection with McCarthy’s work. Indeed, McCarthy’s dialogue alone is indebted to Hemingway’s technique: sparse, often one- or two-word responses leaving much to implication and subtext and thereby requiring some extrapolation on the part of the reader in order to fully grasp the weight or true meaning of the words being spoken. Along with this, as much of the meaning often lies in what is left *un*said in the text as in what is said explicitly—in typical Hemingwayesque fashion. To put it differently, the characters’ *actions* themselves tell much about what they are really feeling.

A particularly good example of this occurs in *All the Pretty Horses,* again just after John Grady’s arrival at the hacienda, when the hacendado asks John Grady if it had only been him and Rawlins who had ridden in from Texas: “John Grady looked at the table. The paper cat stepped thin and slant among the shapes of the cats thereon. He looked up again. Yessir, he said. Just me and him” (Horses 116). At this point, the reader is well aware that there had been a third member of their riding party, Blevins, who had had his horse stolen and who had subsequently stolen it

back and who was now currently on the run from Mexican authorities. So by the act of looking down at the table, the reader can surmise that John Grady is considering whether to mention Blevins to the hacendado, thereby possibly implicating him and Rawlins in Blevins' unlawfulness, or simply to tell the hacendado a lie. We understand that he has chosen the latter, which proves disastrous later on in the story.

Another good example occurs in *The Crossing*, when at the request of his younger brother, Billy sets out on horseback seeking the nameless young girl to whom Boyd had evidently promised to return, but cannot since he is now bedridden with a bullet-wound in his shoulder. Billy finally finds her in Namiquipa:

> Billy watched her pass and when she was out of sight he sat in the grass and studied his boots standing there and the slow passing of the small river and the tops of the grass that bent and recovered constantly in the morning breeze. Then he reached for the boots and pulled them on and stood and walked up and bridled and saddled the horse and mounted up and rode out into the road and set out behind her (Crossing 319-320).

Here, it is all action with no dialogue at all, and it is this very lack which is troubling about the scene. Billy has ridden for many days in search of the girl, yet at this moment when he has finally found her, he does not immediately call out or even motion to her. Instead, he watches her pass and then sits down and stares at his boots and then out at the river. The question, then, becomes "Why?" In answering the question, the reader must think back to an earlier scene in the novel wherein Boyd first tells Billy that the girl wishes to go to Namiquipa to see her mother. Billy responds resentfully: "You aint above runnin off with her. Are you? (Crossing 237)." In tandem with a later scene after Boyd gets shot, whereupon Billy prays, "Dont be dead... You're

all I got" (Crossing 274), we come to the understanding that the girl threatens to rob Billy of the only possession he feels he has left in the wake of his parents' death: Boyd himself. For Billy, to be dispossessed of Boyd is to have no purpose in life—no ties to the world and no order by which to live, the rest of the Parham family being dead by this point—and this explains why he seems so reluctant to approach the girl upon first seeing her.

It is useful to turn to a scene which typifies dispossession literally, namely the "old Comanche road" on the ranch that John Grady Cole rides out upon after his grandfather's funeral:

> When the wind was in the north you could hear them, the horses and the breath of the horses and the horses' hooves that were shod in rawhide and the rattle of lances and the constant drag of the travois poles in the sand like the passing of some enormous serpent and the young boys naked on wild horses jaunty as circus riders and hazing wild horses before them and the dogs trotting with the tongues aloll and footslaves following half naked and sorely burdened and above all the low chant of their traveling song which the riders sang as they rode, nation and ghost of nation passing in a soft chorale across that mineral waste to darkness bearing lost to all history and all remembrance like a grail the sum of their secular and transitory and violent lives (Horses 5).

Here we may return to the idea of modernist pastiche in McCarthy's work: As before, McCarthy channels Hemingway, specifically his tendency toward paratactic accumulation on the few occasions when his sentences *did* run long (hence, the onslaught of *ands).* And we may also note, importantly, that McCarthy's sentence has an added Faulknerian dimension, a dimension most easily engaged by evoking the so-called "long-sentence," temporal complexity its defining quality, memory its "formal precondition" (Postmodernism 133). Indeed, the Faulknerian long-

sentence often "shifts gears from the traumatic present of the obsessive memory of the past, across the listeners' situation, to the present of the [sentence] in our own reading time" (Postmodernism 134). When applied to the passage above, with John Grady appropriately standing in as the "listener" (he "hears" the Comanches in the wind), the analysis works quite well—it would, indeed, be perfect were it not for one qualifier: the decidedly spatialized turn of McCarthy's sentence. Whereas for Faulkner, the individual subject acted as the repository of memory and thus as the medium through which conflicting temporalities would clash, for McCarthy, space replaces the individual subject in that regard. It is, in fact, this spatial dominant, this *spatialization of time*, which "has often seemed to offer one or more productive ways of distinguishing postmodernism from modernism proper" (Postmodernism 154). McCarthy's world, in other words, is one in which space itself has a memory: It evokes the historical past of a native culture wiped from the face of the earth, which manifests itself corporeally as a ghost-like series of images in the road. Their presence, coupled with their understood inaccessibility, registers a profound sense of loss and seems, ultimately, to speak to the instability of space in the wake of modernity. Indeed, John Grady is himself but a link strung along an indeterminate chain of alternating claims and dispossessions: oil-drillers will soon dispossess John Grady from the land just as the Grady ranchers had dispossessed the natives a century before. Here, then, we come closer to something like the real history of the West, beyond myth, beyond reification—the history of the American West is a traumatic history of ongoing dispossession.

So the question now becomes: Where does the cowboy stand in this real West? No longer entitled to his family's land, John Grady finds himself with only his labor to sell on the market. Thus it is with this singular possession that he sets out on his journey to Mexico. It is here, then, that we return to the question of *labor*, as it pertains specifically to the postmodern condition. As

a means of combating unionization and the subsequent demand for higher wages, neoliberal economics has given way to highly decentralized business models based on what Harvey calls the "accumulation" of capital, such that corporations may outsource labor to markets where conditions are more favorable, *viz.* cheaper, less empowered. This global outsourcing coupled with deunionization render the life of the laborer highly precarious, and this notion carries over unambiguously into McCarthy's work. Indeed, the "fleeting, the ephemeral, the fugitive, and the contingent" (Harvey 171) nature of ranch-hands' working conditions in many ways embody the logic of flexible-accumulative labor exactly.

We need only look at Billy Parham's life in order to fully grasp the way this translates into McCarthy's fiction. No longer grounded by the stability that his family's ranch had once offered after his parents are murdered, he has no recourse but to sell his labor elsewhere as a ranch-hand hired for a series of short-term durations. We can trace the geographic mobility of his labor, starting in *The Crossing* and through to the end of *Cities of the Plain:* First, he works with a group of "herders, driving sheep down from the hills and through the high vaulted gate" of an ejido (Crossing 329). Then he works "for a stable out on the highway for ten days," sleeping "in a stall until he [has] enough money for clothes and for the busfare to El Paso" (Crossing 339). He winters out in a "linecamp on the Little Colorado" (Crossing 346), and the next we see of him, he is working on the McGovern ranch where most of *Cities of the Plain* takes place. After John Grady's death he sets out again but finds "no work in that country anywhere" and sees almost no "stock of any kind" out on that dry American landscape (Cities 264). So in the end, Billy works "as an extra in a movie" (Cities 265) and then finds himself completely homeless, an old hobo "[sitting] beneath a concrete overpass and [watching] the gusts of rain blowing across the fields" (Cities 265).

We may consider the historical realities of Billy's plight. *The Border Trilogy* is set in a postwar America whose Western frontier is all but closed-off; barbed-wire fences section off private properties and highways penetrate the natural landscape: Rawlins asks, "How the hell do they expect a man to ride a horse in this country?" to which John Grady replies simply, "They dont" (Horses 31), disclosing an awareness of the dissonance between their present reality and the cowboy lifestyle that they seek to actualize; their field of work is well on its way out from the American labor market. The Grady ranch, as we have seen, is bought out by oil-drillers, and the McGovern ranch in New Mexico, where Billy and John Grady's stories intertwine in *Cities of the Plain*, is soon to be repossessed by the army (presumably as a site for nuclear testing). So too, the 1950s saw the rise of factory farming, or Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs), which would soon come to replace the ranch system entirely. By de-skilling and mechanizing much of the labor process involved with raising livestock, the CAFO ultimately did away with the need for traditional ranchers in the postwar economy.

Billy's itinerant existence, then, is ultimately triggered by a postwar economy in flux. That one of the last jobs he takes near the conclusion of *Cities of the Plain* is with a film crew as a movie extra is interesting on a few different levels. It signals a dramatic shift in the nature of Billy's labor, from the work of a traditional ranch-hand to that of an actor in the background of a movie, which points, in turn, to that very aspect of postmodernity with which we have been engaged since the start of this chapter: the unbridled commodification of images brought on by the "pressures to accelerate turnover time" (Harvey 288) in the neoliberal economy. Indeed, it is through the institution of cinema and the so-called "entertainment industry," whose commodity is the intangible spectacle of film itself, that the neoliberal economy responds to these pressures, since a film's use-value all but expires for consumers immediately after the viewing process. In

this way, the film industry must churn out spectacle after spectacle with the expectation of a fast rate of profitable return. It is no surprise, then, that *TheBorder Trilogy* ends in the "spring of the second year of the new millenium" (Cities 264): Billy's world is now one which seems all too familiar; indeed, it is *our* world.

III. The *Real* West (or, The West and The Real)

In this chapter I have attempted to draw the line between what I have called the virtual West and the real West as it exists in our perceptions of its history, and to analyze the extent to which McCarthy's *Border Trilogy* contributes to both. So far, it can be said that while McCarthy incorporates a certain cinematographic logic into his prose, such that it often reads as a kind of literary translation of cinematography which thus corroborates or calls attention to the notion of this virtual West, his emphasis on labor and his appropriation of modernist technique suggests a deliberate departure from virtuality towards something more like the real West, pointing specifically to the violent, tragic nature of its history. To my mind, however, the point at which Billy becomes a movie extra is the point at which this entire assertion collapses; indeed, it is a strange moment in the *Trilogy* in which the presupposed distinction between virtual and real American West—the very crux of my argument—is completely unhinged.

This is all to say that Billy, who in many ways figures in as the very embodiment of the so-called real West in the novels, having come out on the other side with no home and no family to his name—McCarthy's take on the postmodern archetype of the "last cowboy"—finds himself in the realm of the virtual in the end. Indeed, with the movement towards services-oriented labor offered by the entertainment industry, the "realism" of the American West that McCarthy achieves in his focus on cowboy labor folds back in on itself and is called into question; Billy's

identity as a laborer, thus legitimizing his identity as a *cowboy*, is now offset by his own virtual reification as a movie extra. The *Trilogy*, in other words, lapses back into reification in the last instance, and thus it terminates in a kind of undecidability with regards to what is virtual and what is real. Returning to the first example which I have said epitomizes the virtual West (if, indeed, that distinction can still be made), Ronald Reagan himself—the 'teflon president'—it may be useful to ask: Who is more real, Ronald Reagan or Billy Parham? The answer is decidedly not so simple, since President Reagan (as we know him) is himself mainly a fiction, a persona presented to the public through such mediations as the film camera and the televised image; he is *image* as such, "carefully mounted, crafted, and orchestrated with all the artifice that contemporary image production could command" (Harvey 330). The argument could indeed be made that Billy Parham is at least *just as,* if not more 'real' than Reagan. Regardless, the point is that the line between virtuality and reality is unequivocally blurred in the strange world we inhabit today, and it is this blurred line that is evoked when Billy becomes a movie extra.

In light of this, we may now follow the implication to its logical conclusion: that there is no real West—only reified histories, only narratives, of which *The Border Trilogy* is one among a myriad of others, after all. As such, we as readers are made to consider the troubling notion that there is some degree of virtuality inherent in every attempt to conceptualize history, in that the end result of the endeavor is *never truly real;* that to render history is to take up an "absent cause" precisely for the reason that history is "*not* a text, not a narrative" (Unconscious 35); rather, it is something outside of ourselves that we cannot quite pin down, much less express effectively. As such, we must add an important category to our model such that our binary schema—the virtual West versus the real West—becomes tertiary: the Real West, in the Lacanian sense of the word; that American West which is now forever inaccesible to us,

precisely because our only recourse in *attempting* to access it *is* through reification and narrative. The harder we try to access history, in other words, the further we move away from it as it exists in the Real.

So in attempting to reconcile this moment in the *Trilogy* when the distinction between the real and the virtual collapses—Billy's final reification as a movie extra—we need only say simply that to be confounded *is* the point, that there is no hope of reconciliation; instead, there is only the Lacanian Real, the historical sublime: "A desired horizon that can never be reached but only approached" (Elias xviii) via the limited faculties of human expression. At best, then, we can say that McCarthy's real West is not so much defined by its "real-ness" as it is by its function as a counternarrative, aimed at upsetting the "imperialist drive to control the past" (Elias xvii) by giving voice to the marginalized and the dispossessed who have been relegated to the backdrop in that imperial narrative, thus accentuating the precarious nature of these peoples' subsistence, *viz.* labor. *The Border Trilogy*, in other words, follows a postcolonial agenda wherein we are challenged to unlearn and reconsider a particular historical narrative—namely, the stereotypical version of the American West propagated by Hollywood which often obscures the harsh realities of dispossession and genocide (though the *Trilogy* mostly approaches the latter sideways, burying it in subtext; *Blood Meridian* gives more explicit attention to this aspect of the conquest of the West). Indeed, at the end of *Cities of the Plain* Billy comes to the realization that "in everything he'd ever thought about the world and about his life in it he'd been wrong" (267). This assertion, I think, is doubly meant to project outwards upon the reader with regards to historical narrative, such that the *Trilogy* essentially becomes a reframing of certain conventions, in typical postmodern style: A truth is defined solely by its limitations, what is real is not really Real, and what has been called progress does not come without irrevocable loss.

Chapter II

The Cowboy in Postmodern Space

This chapter seeks to engage *The Border Trilogy* specifically in terms of spatial representations. To begin, it is useful to theorize a general definition of postmodern space by following the trajectory of literary history: First, there is the Victorian realist narrative, which held Enlightenment ideals as its precondition, namely the ability for a subject to *come to know* the objective world that surrounds it (that is to say, *space*). Thus, Victorian realism presupposes a "rational correspondence between the individual and the world" such that the subject ultimately "learns to map the outer world accurately and, thereby, to achieve inner orientation." The modernist narrative, on the other hand, reads like a backlash against realist principles, calling that very presupposition into question; indeed, it renders space as "uncanny rather than lawful" to the extent that the subject "loses its orientational grasp" and "loses its own coherent identity" in the process (Weinstein 2). The modernist narrative, in other words, addresses the limits—the equivocal nature, or even *failure*—of Enlightenment thought; it is one of *unknowing*, just as the realist narrative is one of *knowing.*

Here, then, that we arrive at the question of postmodernism: While both knowing and *un*knowing—realism and modernism, respectively—assume the *possibility* of "a viable purchase on the exterior world," postmodernism, in a rather pessimistic move, does away with the assumption entirely (Weinstein 5). Indeed, the postmodern narrative takes modernism one step further: The objective world is not only *unknown*—it is wholly *unknowable.* In light of this, it is worth investigating the extent to which McCarthy's cowboys inhabit this kind of elusive postmodern space—a space so unstable that it often seems to possess a mind of its own, to the

point of ultimately being "unrepresentable" (Weinstein 199).

This very problem of unrepresentability arises in explicit terms at numerous points throughout the *Trilogy;* indeed, the first important piece of evidence which suggests that McCarthy's cowboys are navigating (or, rather, *attempting* to navigate) this kind of postmodern space is the prevalence of the numerous, lengthy embedded narratives that pockmark the overall frame of the *Trilogy.* When I say "embedded narratives," I mean, of course, *stories within the story,* or the long and often complex narratorial digressions for which McCarthy is notorious and which perhaps make his work so distinctive from others. To speak of these embeddings generally, it can be said that each one reads like a kind of poststructuralist meditation speaking to the very problem of the unrepresentability about which we are concerned. This notion comes to a head at the conclusion of *Cities of the Plain,* in the conversation between Billy and the nameless old hobo under the highway, which essentially reads like a long and complex rumination on the relations between reality, history, dreams, and narrative. The dialogue finally terminates with the dictum that they are all four essentially one in the same, and that in the end they all fail to represent what is objectively *real*—or Real, perhaps, in the Lacanian sense of the word. Indeed, the hobo tells Billy near the end of their encounter that "where all is known no narrative is possible" (Cities 275)—that real knowing, in other words, *precludes* narrative—and that in constructing any form of representation, the "thing that is sought is altogether other" (Cities 287). As such, the mysterious old hobo acts as a sage of poststructuralist or Lacanian thought, proclaiming to Billy the ultimate *unknowability* of the objective world. The general effect of this embedded narrative (and, indeed, of allof the embeddings throughout the *Trilogy*) in its critique of narrative—how it always fails us and yet how we can never escape it—is that we as readers are, in turn, made to be skeptical of the frame; we are, in other words, made to be skeptical of

The Border Trilogy itself. Thus we lapse back into the preceding chapter's argument, questioning the "real-ness" of McCarthy's rendering of the American West.

In light of this, we may wish to take a closer look at one more of these embeddings, just to demonstrate how each seems to add to the same kind of poststructuralist meditation: The blind man in *The Crossing*, for example, recounts to Billy how a "German Huertista named Wirtz," against whom the man had been fighting as a rebel soldier, forces him to kneel so that Wirtz may kiss him, which turns out to be "no kiss" at all but rather a way of sucking the man's eyeballs out from their sockets (Crossing 276). The man's blindness leaves him forlorn as he initially equates the loss of the visible world with the loss of the world itself. With time, however, he comes to the understanding that blindness is, in a way, inherent to the human condition, regardless of whether that blindness is literal or not. He claims that "the world [is] sentient to its core and secret and black beyond men's imagining," and that as such its mystery cannot be ascribed simply to "what [can] be seen or unseen" (Crossing 283). Here, again, we arrive at that same conclusion: As it passes through us, undergoing its necessary narrativization, visualization, etc., the true objective world always escapes us.

Having established that this problem of unrepresentability is, indeed, central to the *Trilogy*, it is now useful, perhaps, to take a closer look into the material causes that create the conditions for the existence of a world in which any attempt at representation is undermined.

I. Hyperspace as the New Frontier (or, "The Grid")

We have already established how the myth of the American West has seen its "recrudescence" in the neoliberal age in the form of iconography; how the depthless, stereotypical images of the American past become viable stand-ins for historical factuality, as embodied by "cowboy"

Ronald Reagan himself and the way his 1980 campaign ultimately came to "put a new gloss on the possibilities of a mediatized politics shaped by images alone" (Harvey 330). But beneath the glossy image at play on the surface, there is an added dimension to the link between Reagan's presidency and the mythos of the American West, which is the revival of Turner's "Frontier Thesis," a seminal nineteenth-century document which theorizes the impact of the Frontier on American culture and identity. Most importantly, at least for our purposes, the Thesis also makes explicit the intimate connection between the Frontier and capitalist expansion; it holds, quite intuitively, that "the prosperity and high growth rates of the American economy had been made possible by the continual expansion of the Frontier into regions richly endowed with natural resources" (Slotkin 645-46). Neoliberal capitalism reassumes this logic (which is the logic of capitalism itself, after all), but having run out of space in the American West in which to expand and resources thereof to exploit, the neoliberal revitalization of the Turnerian thesis calls for capitalist expansion into a wholly new frontier: hyperspace. The "muliplication and manipulation of financial capital"—the abstraction of capital into the realm of the immaterial, wholly intangible and computerized—"replaces both agrarian commodities and industrial production as the engine of economic expansion" (Slotkin 646). As such, Wall Street in New York now becomes the epicenter of the expansion into this new frontier, giving rise to a booming "casino economy" replete with "financial speculation and fictitious capital formation" (Harvey 331-32).

Hyperspace is thus born of the wholesale "intensification of communications technology" in the neoliberal world-system, "to the point at which capital transfers... abolish space and time, instantaneously effectuated across national spaces" (Jameson, quoted in Weinstein 198). This is the condition of postmodernity: A world in which time and space are completely annihilated by the baffling movement of global capital and which gives rise, unsurprisingly, to a certain

problem of representation:

> The central value system, to which capitalism has always appealed to validate and gauge its actions, is dematerialized and shifting, time horizons are collapsing, and it is hard to tell exactly what space we are in when it comes to assessing causes and effects, meanings or values (Harvey 298).

In the wake of capital, the world's spaces are rendered undifferentiated, flatlined into an "unimaginable grid" (Weinstein 198) across which capital may perform its speculative operations; in the last instance, it is the unchartable movement of capital through hyperspace that renders our world so little amenable to representation, spatial or otherwise.

So in returning to the subject of embedded narratives, as they function in the *Trilogy* with respect to this "grid," at least this much can be said: Our main protagonists (Billy and John Grady) so frequently find themselves in these transient yet deeply involved encounters with any number of minor characters ranging on the class spectrum from vagrants to aristocrats, from subalterns to authority figures, such that the interrelationships between them are increasingly difficult, if not impossible to establish. This suggests that McCarthy's "textual universe requires a large number of necessarily small players in order to operate at all." In this way, they are all ultimately subsumed under a single identity—the lone "major player" in the novel which is "the unrepresentable grid itself" (Weinstein 203)—an analysis originally used to describe Pynchon's novels but which applies equally well here.

To approach this notion of the grid from another angle, so as to garner a deeper understanding of the way it operates in *The Border Trilogy*, we can look to a scene in *The Crossing*, namely the scene after which Boyd is shot:

> When [Billy] looked back he could see all five horsemen on the plain coming hard after him in a thin line of dust, some of them whipping over and under, all carrying their rifles held out at their side, all of it clear and stark in the new morning sun. When he looked ahead he saw nothing but grass and the sporadic palmilla that dotted the plain stretching away to the blue sierras. There was nowhere to run and nowhere to stand... He leaned forward clutching his brother to him and he talked to Niño and dug in with his heels under the horse's flanks and they went pounding over the empty plain with the stirrups flapping and kicking out (Crossing 271).

To begin the analysis, we must first consider the image that this scene invokes: A group of riders emerging on the horizon. It is a dramatic and iconic image, so familiar to the American audience to the point of being a cliché, and is structurally coded to signal the onset of some highly consequential altercation or epic finale between two opposing sides. The image is especially prevalent in the postwar variation of the Western—the so-called "professional plot"—wherein the lone-ranger archetype of the "classical plot" becomes replaced instead by a "powerful, elite, and independent group" of cowboys (Wright 173) epitomized, for example, by Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch.* In McCarthy's universe, however, the scene does not register as this kind of epic stand-off or battle between opposing forces; instead it registers as a desperate attempt at escape. There is no Rooster Cogburn, in other words, charging guns-ablaze at an enemy who clearly outnumbers him, and there is certainly no Pike Bishop and his Wild Bunch storming brazenly towards imminent death out of some macho sense of commitment to abstract principles; there is only an adolescent Billy Parham, terrified and clutching his kid brother who is bleeding out through the bullet-hole in his shoulder. And while "riders on the horizon" *is,* in fact, also structurally coded to signal a chase scene (after the initial botched bank job, for example, *The Wild Bunch* becomes just such a chase until the gang finally finds sanctuary in Mexico), the important thing to note here is that the *Trilogy* precludes this other possibility: There is *only* the

flight, there is *only* the escape. What this all points to, then, is that McCarthy's cowboys are a far cry from the conventional archetype—the level-headed, self-sufficient lone rangers to which we are so accustomed; rather, they are dispossessed and utterly resourceless social beings who throughout *The Border Trilogy* will always find themselves at the mercy of a ruthless and punitive authority.

In light of this, the question now becomes: Who is (or what, exactly, is the nature of) that authority? Indeed, throughout the *Trilogy*, the true agent of authority is often hard to pinpoint or locate in any concrete sense, such that it seems, ultimately, to exist and operate as a singular presence. In answering the question, we must first look to the role of *space* in the scene above, decidedly central to the plight in which Billy finds himself, given that he is rendered completely witless with "nowhere to run and nowhere to stand" in the terrifying wake of the oncoming riders. Here, then, is the point at which the grid most clearly presents itself: We see Billy's inability to impose mastery over the space through which he rides; as such, he cannot orient himself properly to even so much as *fathom* the possibility of effective escape. Who (or, indeed, *what*), then, *does* lay claim to mastery over this space in which Billy finds himself trapped, if not Billy himself? The answer, I think, is *capital*, for indeed, the grid *belongs* to capital, since it is by the force of global capital that the grid was created in the first place (as we have established earlier). Indeed, if we trace the strings of authority upward through the scene above, capital is that last totalizing stop: The distant riders are pursuing the two Parham brothers under the pretense of recovering stolen horses (or, rather, horses they *believe* to be stolen; Billy and Boyd believe otherwise, for these are the horses that were first taken from the Parham ranch in the aftermath of their parents' death). As such, the theft of these horses signals a threat to *someone's* capital investment (we never really find out *whose* investment specifically), and as such, it is by

the unseen force of capital that Billy finds himself so persecuted in the end.

What we see in the scene above, then, is brought on by the deadly collusion of space, capital, and violence. It is the complex inner-workings of this triumvirate, which I will argue remains a constant presence throughout *The Border Trilogy*, that I would now like to explore further in the next section, with an special emphasis on *violence* as it functions and is depicted in the narrative.

II. Objective Violence in *The Border Trilogy*

To be sure, violence as a trope has been integral to the Western genre since its inception, but here I argue that there is something crucial about the way violence is depicted in McCarthy's novels that differs from the way it is typically depicted in other Western narratives. As a means of engaging this difference, first the distinction must be made between what Žižek terms *subjective violence*, or violence "performed by a clearly identifiable agent" (1) and *objective violence*, which is a form of violence "no longer attributable to concrete individuals," but is instead "purely 'objective,' systemic, anonymous"—a violence *inherent* to the smooth-functioning neoliberal world-system and thus to the enigma of capital itself (13).

This argument—that McCarthy's Western novels foreground a more *objective* type of violence—presupposes that, traditionally, the Western genre has mostly concerned itself with the subjective form of violence in Žižek's framework; one need only watch the opening gunfight in *The Wild Bunch* to get a sense of how this subjective violence is accentuated, even fetishized: The viewer can see very clearly who is behind the gun before each shot rings out. We *do*, however, get the suggestion of a more objective type of violence—the violent nature of capital itself—by the fact that *behind* the men behind the guns is the railroad itself—the corporate body

(the embodiment of capital) who hired the posse on the roof in the first place. Here, then, we get a concrete example of Žižek's vital argument that this invisible, objective violence so often creates the *conditions* for the plainly visible subjective violence that we see acted out so often on the world's stage.

By contrast, returning to the pivotal scene in *The Crossing* wherein Boyd gets shot, we see the *subjectivity* of the violent act completely done away with—indeed, we note that the bullet comes out of nowhere: "Boyd turned. He put up one hand as if to reach for the first of the horses as they came up out of the trees and then his shirt belled out behind him redly and he fell down on the ground" (Crossing 269). It is to be inferred, of course, that the shot came from one of the five horsemen on their trail, but we never so much as see their faces and, indeed, their very identities remain unclear or unknown to us. All we see is the fated bullet which passes through Billy's field of vision in "one frozen moment," on through Boyd's shoulder in turn, and onward into the abyss. As such, in its trajectory the bullet negates causal agency by seeming to take on an impossible agency of its own; it is there and then gone "like a whisper from the void" (Crossing 270), uncalled for, inexplicable; it *is* objective violence itself.

This trend—this violence which at first seems subjective but which is, upon closer inspection, a rather more objective type of violence—persists throughout the trilogy and is, in fact, central to its final installment, *Cities of the Plain*. With this in mind, it is worth looking at the epic dog-hunt which registers as the first explicitly violent scene in a novel that is otherwise comparatively non-violent, at least as it stands within the overall scope of McCarthy's work. But when the blood inevitably comes, it does so explosively, in every sense of the word:

> John Grady came riding up behind Billy and swung his rope and heeled the yellow dog and quirted the horse on with the doubled rope end and then dallied.

> The slack of Billy's catchrope hissed along the ground and stopped and the big yellow dog rose suddenly from the ground in headlong flight taut between the two ropes and the ropes resonated a single brief dull note and then the dog exploded. The sun was not an hour up and in the flat traverse of the light on the mesa the blood that burst in the air before them was as bright and unexpected as an apparition. Something evoked out of nothing and wholly unaccountable. The dog's head went cartwheeling, the ropes recoiled in the air, the dog's body slammed to the ground with a dull thud (Cities 167).

Again, as before, the violence cannot easily be attributed to individual motive or decision; indeed, this attribution is purposefully deferred in a rather humorous exchange in the immediate aftermath of the dog's exploding:

> Billy: Damn. I didnt know you was goin to do that.
> John Grady: I didnt either.
> Billy: Son of a bitch (Cities 168).

Here, John Grady exempts himself from having had any agency in the event in question. The ropes between which the dog is caught even adds to this effect; it creates a distance between the characters and the dog itself such that the dog is suspended in mid-air, defying gravity, almost as if by magic. As such, the violence takes on an unknowable life of its own and thereby becomes something that is truly and "wholly unaccountable." But as before, we need only think about *what* the dog represents, and *whose interest* the dog's destruction ultimately serves in order to make sense of it. Indeed, the cattle on which the wild dogs are feeding stand in as a capital investment on the part of the ranch and as such the dogs signal a threat to that investment. So here it is that we arrive at capital—again, that last totalizing stop.

If nothing else, this instance of explosive violence serves to foreshadow the novel's (and, by extension, the trilogy's) disastrous conclusion: the culminating event which is the death of John Grady himself. In the dismal aftermath, Billy is left with the impossible task of ascribing accountability for the event. In the moments following John Grady's last breath, he cries out in a kind of default or knee-jerk reaction: "Goddamn whores" (Cities 261). As readers, however, we do get the sense that these are but empty signifiers, a senseless outcry befitting of a senseless tragedy—that it is, in other words, an accusation which Billy himself proabably does not believe. Indeed, the rather unlikely implication that "whores" as a class are somehow at fault in this disaster only point to Billy's inability, and thus to his greater desire, to find a face to match the tragedy. And if we turn to the question of John Grady's own implication in the matter, or the extent to which John Grady actually brought his death upon himself, there are two interpretations that can be made, at least to my mind: The first is that John Grady feels that he had no say in the matter whatsoever, and that his death was the only logical conclusion in the wake of Magdalena's death. John Grady's sentiments regarding his love for Magdalena certainly lend themselves to this interpretation: "There's some things you dont decide. Decidin had nothing to do with it" (Cities 121). Again, then, we see John Grady exempting himself from being an agent complicit in the tragic events that unfold later on. The other interpretation that can be made is the rather cynical judgement that just because John Grady *considers* himself exempt does not make it so, that he brought it upon himself and as such the fault is entirely his own. While this is indeed a viable interpretation, the implication is no less bleak, for if we are to read John Grady's actions as a final display of agency, the sad implication is that in displaying that very agency, his only recourse is to his own demise—death *is* the final display of agency.

Curiously enough, we are perhaps made to think of the larger systemic implications of

John Grady's death with the passing mention of an unnamed "businessman" in a preceding exchange between Billy and the police captain:

> Billy: He dont own the White Lake, does he? Eduardo.
> Captain: No.
> Billy: I dont reckon you'd tell me who does.
> Captain: It is not important. A businessman. He has nothing to do with any of this (Cities 145).

Given the captain's rather dismissive response assuring Billy that this businessman "has nothing to do" with anything, as readers we cannot help but wonder to what extent the opposite is true. If nothing else, we can at least glean from this conversation that the brothel—that is, the White Lake itself—exists within the nexus of the larger economic world-system (albeit illegitimately), thus bringing the commodification of sex inherent in capitalism to its logical end—indeed, its purest form. As such, this gives rise, once again, to theultimate question with which the trilogy seems to concern itself: Where does the buck stop?

Perhaps in answering the question we need only appropriate the term from its origins in poker, re-frame it in the monetary sense of the word (as it is often used in the common parlance), and simply say this: The buck stops with the buck itself. This is to say that capital is always that unseen force driving each scene of violence throughout *The Border Trilogy;* indeed, we need only make a short list to see how capital is at work in each respective instance: stolen horses, cattle threatened by a pack of wild dogs, a prostitute's desire to marry a client—each conflict signals a threat to some capital investment or another. In deflecting the question of causality away from any specific individual agent in each scene of violence, McCarthy urges us to consider the way in which violence is so often objective against the backdrop of capitalism, or

the way in which violence under neoliberalism "is no longer attributable to concrete individuals and their 'evil' intentions, but is purely 'objective,' systemic, anonymous" (Žižek 13).

III. The Dialectic of Space

Having thus established the way in which capital and violence are related—indeed, how they are *one and the same*—and having explicated how this relationship plays out in the *Trilogy* with a few examples, I would now like to direct our attention to the crucial, third part of the triumvirate: space, and how it comes into the mix among the other two. We have already touched on it in the previous section's analysis of the "riders on the horizon"; how they ultimately stand-in as the harbingers of capital's objective violence; how spaces become gridded to serve the movement of global capital so that it may "pursue its goal of profitability in blessed indifference to how [that] movement will affect social reality" (Žižek 12), such that the subject's ability to represent those spaces and thus orient himself within them is effectively wrested from him (as we have seen in the case of Billy Parham).

To further engage the spatial aspect as it relates to both capital and the violence inherent to it, it is useful, I think, to return to the very inaugural event which sets the entire *Trilogy* into motion: John Grady's initial dispossession of the family ranch, which ultimately propels him and Rawlins across the border into Mexico. In line with the constant deferral of individual agency that persists throughout the *Trilogy*, we note, importantly, the same thing going on here: The ascription of accountability to any specific individual in John Grady's dispossession is purposefully deferred. We may first look, for instance, towards the question of John Grady's mother and her role in the land transaction in question, since she holds the title to the ranch and as such seems, at least at first glance, to be heavily implicated as a person responsible for John

Grady's dispossession. Upon closer inspection, however, it becomes clear that her decision to sell off the ranch, in spite of John Grady's pathetic pleas for her to do otherwise, is not actually a decision at all but is instead a kind of inevitability brought on by forces beyond hers or anyone else's control: "You dont know what you're talking about," she tells him. "There's not any money. This place has barely paid expenses for twenty years. There hasnt been a white person worked here since before the war" (Horses 15). This quote essentially invokes the greater economic reconstruction of the postwar years, a movement which saw the flight of production from First- to Third World countries where labor is less regulated, *viz.* cheaper, and which thus saw "unemployment rise to unprecedented postwar levels in advanced capitalist countries" like, for example, America (Harvey 147). Thus, her hands are tied and so her very agency is called into question. In other words, the agent being absent, so the question of her accountability becomes suspended. Indeed, it becomes irrelevant.

Similarly, the oil companies on the obverse side of the transaction—those who seek to buy the ranch for drilling—are also (perhaps surprisingly) absolved from blame; no fingers are ever pointed at these companies explicitly. In fact, the only evidence of the oil companies' involvement at all comes to the reader in the subtext of a single quote from John Grady's father, a quick and subtle hint easily missed upon first reading: "There's a lot of money in the ground out there... Number one I C Clark that come in last year was a big well" (Horses 12). Here, the tone of the statement is not one of accusation or indignation at someone or something; rather, it is one of resignation, as if it were inevitable. The ultimate point I wish to make here is that while oil-drilling is buried deep in the subtext of *All the Pretty Horses*, the nature of this particular form of capitalist exploitation is nevertheless highly significant, since oil-drilling is perhaps the best example wherein the relation between space and capital is drawn most intimately; in fact,

with respect to oil-drilling, the two are nearly inextricable: there is literally "money in the ground." In light of this, we can say that in this instance it is through this space that capital (and thus the violence within) becomes *literalized.*

It is here, then, that we arrive at a kind of spatial dialectic operating in *The Border Trilogy*: While it is the unseen enigma of capital—that elusive and "inexorable extract," wholly autonomous and barely perceived, if at all, by "the actual people involved in interaction and in the productive processes" (Žižek 13)—that collapses the world's spaces in the wake of its movements, thus hindering our ability to effectively represent them, so it is also *through space* that the force of capital at work actually reveals itself. Indeed, John Grady's initial dispossession is perhaps the most explicit way that capital's objective violence factors into the *Trilogy*—that is, if we are to hold *dispossession* as a form of violence in its own right (to which my answer is "Yes!"). The conclusion to be made, then, is that dispossession itself ultimately signals the culmination, the point of total collusion, of that very triumvirate which we first sought to investigate: space, capital, and violence.

So the question now becomes: Where *is* the accusation or indignation, even if in the form of casual gripes against the system? Why, instead, the tragic sense of futility, resignation, and defeat that so plagues *The Border Trilogy?* It is this question that I seek to address in the next chapter.

Chapter III

The Border Trilogy *as Ideological Dreamscape*
(...But Whose Dream is It?)

In the two preceding chapters I have arrived at the following conclusions, respectively: We have established McCarthy's *Border Trilogy* main function as postcolonial counternarrative, rewriting or reframing of the conventional myth of conquest of the American West by foregrounding the traumas of dispossession brought on in the wake of capitalist land-acquisition, and I have characterized the space through which McCarthy's cowboys ride as having the qualities of postmodern hyperspace, an unrepresentable grid across which capital moves freely as an inherently violent force, unhindered by spatial barriers and wholly objective, wholly indifferent as to how its movements affect social reality (the lives of the real people who inhabit those spaces). This final chapter seeks to draw further upon both of these conclusions, fleshing them out and ultimately bringing them together in order to invoke a larger discussion of the forces of mythology and ideology as they are seen at work in *The Border Trilogy*.

I. The Captain's Smile (or, McCarthy's Neocolonial Critique)

"The economic health of every country is a matter of proper concern to all [America's] neighbors, near and far..."

Franklin D. Roosevelt
Bretton Woods Conference, 1944

In this section I argue that the scope of McCarthy's postcolonial agenda goes *beyond* acritique of the older, more "traditional" strain of colonialism. I argue, instead, that there is also a crucial critique of *neocolonialism* implicit in *The Border Trilogy*—a critique that is central to an

understanding of the work as a whole and which, as such, simply cannot go unremarked upon. As a means of engaging this argument initially, I would like to address a specific scene in *All the Pretty Horses:* After Rawlins and John Grady are escorted off the hacienda at gunpoint by Mexican authorities, the captain interrogates Rawlins and inquires as to his wages working as a ranch-hand. Rawlins tells him, "We was gettin two hundred pesos a month [working for the hacienda]." The captain then asks, "In Texas what do they pay for this work." Rawlins then responds, "I dont know. Hundred a month," upon which the captain asks for clarification: "Hundred dollars." After Rawlins responds affirmatively, the captain does the math in his head and then finally says to Rawlins, as if this clarifies something important: "Eight hundred pesos," and then the captain smiles (Horses 164).

It is a strange conversation, and the captain's smile is stranger yet. What are they *actually* talking about? What does that smile indicate? To my mind, there is a critique of neocolonialism behind that smile; the smile bears the weight of history. It is this history that I must address before the scene can be explicated fully.

As a working definition, we may say that *neocolonialism* differs from the older colonialism in that the latter achieves colonization mainly through the explicit and unabashed use of military force—the way the Native American population was systematically removed and exterminated from American territories, for example. Neocolonialism,by contrast, is a postwar development in which conquest is achieved chiefly through economic measures on the international arena: foreign direct investment (FDI), labor and price controls, tariffs, and sanctions all become weapons in this type of colonial struggle between nations competing for dominance on the world-stage. Herein lies the main difference between this newer derivation and its older form: Neocolonial powers *never* wish to be named or recognized as such; the colonial agenda is

masked or even neutralized by such signifiers as "globalization" or "development," and is oftentimes carried out under the false ideological promise of mutual benefit for the colonizing and colonized nation alike (chalked up to a kind of "partnership"). As we shall see, however, the actual process, once carried out, never lives up to its promise—it is, in the last instance, *still* colonialism as such. We need not look any further than international relations between the United States and Mexico during and immediately following World War II—the history that corresponds exactly with the spatial and temporal setting of *The Border Trilogy*—to see how this all plays out.

We can start with the 1942 Reciprocal Trade Agreement, which "aimed to guarantee supplies needed for wartime production in the United States and to diminish scarcities and inflation in basic items in Mexico" (Gauss 176). Here we note the promise of *reciprocity*—of *mutual benefit*—between the two nations, and, indeed, the Trade Agreement seemed to live up to that promise, at least at first: The United States got the raw materials they needed at reduced prices and Mexico, in turn, saw a vast market opened up to them for exports not limited to wartime materials (which were heavily subsidized) but also for rubber, henequen, garbanzos, pineapples, bananas, salt, and fish, to the extent that Mexico's monetary reserves soared to US$372.7 million by 1945 (Gauss 177-78).

With time, however, the Trade Agreement became increasingly problematic. There was growing indignation among Mexican politicians who

> perceived that U.S. efforts to shape Mexican production to meet wartime demands had left little room to address the needs of Mexican consumers. Many blamed U.S. export limits for scarcities and high prices and condemned its policies as a threat to Mexico's fledgling industries... Even when Mexico tried to obtain equipment and machinery needed to develop industries critical to the domestic

> economy, including the electric industry, the United States refused its requests (Gauss 178).

In spite of the growing discontent, hope persisted that Mexico would soon reap the benefits of postwar reconciliation. Indeed, this was the presupposition, *the* main motivation that fueled Mexican cooperation with the 1942 Reciprocal Trade Agreement in the first place: The prospect of financial assistance for development in the wake of Allied victory, which would vault Mexico onto the world-stage as an economic contender.

This all came to a head in 1944 at the Bretton Woods Conference, which saw the establishment of two institutions: the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD). The former sought to stabilize the world's economy in a momentous "postwar settlement" wherein the "U.S. dollar became the medium of world trade, technically backed by a fixed convertibility into gold, and backed politically and economically by the overwhelming power of the U.S. productive apparatus," such that the U.S. production system became the unequivocal "guarantor of international value" (Harvey 296). The latter sought to facilitate the distribution of loans to developing countries; in light of this, the Mexican delegation in attendance at the conference "proposed an amendment that would put postwar 'reconstruction' and 'development' on the same footing." In principle, at least, the international community agreed, ratifying the amendment (Gauss 179).

But even in the wake of Bretton Woods, the amendment notwithstanding, the U.S. increased pressure on Mexico to remain open to FDI as a supplier of raw materials for export—meaning that most of the profits would fall back into the hands of U.S. investors. In other words, rather than provide financial assistance in the interest of developing Mexico's domestic industrial apparatus and markets, the United States instead prioritized the reconstruction of Europe

(precisely what Mexico had feared) as a buttress against the threat of prolifierating communism, and the raw materials needed to advance that reconstruction had to come from *somewhere, viz.* Mexico itself. Meanwhile, Mexico was already mired in economic troubles, the shortfalls of the 1942 Agreement: Overpriced imports coupled with an increase in domestic demand, an overvalued peso, and a falling rate of profit on its own exports in foreign markets all made for a growing trade deficit—indeed, "its monetary reserves plummeted from US$372.7 million in 1945 to US$122.6 million in 1948" (Gauss 180).

In short, while the outcome of the Bretton Woods Conference was presented as being "for-the-good-of-all," for the sake of global economic stability, it is clear that it served mostly to reinforce the U.S.'s emergence as global hegemon of the postwar era, such that *it* was the real beneficiary. Indeed, all the world's economy was literally *hinged*—fixed—upon the value of the dollar: the United States held all the cards, so to speak. It is also clear that this supposed economic stability had its limits, exemplified, if by nothing else, by Mexico itself, whose prospects for development were ultimately repressed, snubbed by the U.S. with the final implementation of the Marshall Plan in 1948, which allocated most of its funding to the postwar reconstruction of Europe and which left Mexico with no other option than to maintain its meager status as provider of raw productive materials, at the cost of its own well-being—the definition of *colony,* which, alas, has not changed with the addition of the prefix.

Here, then, we come full-circle: This is the world of *The Border Trilogy,* the world in which the captain is smiling. The dollars-to-peso conversion that the captain calculates in his head during the interrogation (100 dollars is equivalent to 800 pesos) can be located explicitly within this historical context that I have described above: the overvalued peso; the result of inflation which is, in turn, the direct result of the 1942 Reciprocal Trade Agreement. It points,

furthermore, to the true nature of the Bretton Woods system: A hegemonic device favoring the United States and ultimately giving rise to increased differentials in wages, standards of living, and buying power, of which Mexico decidedly got the short end of the stick.

In light of this, returning again to the interrogation scene in *All the Pretty Horses*, the captain has found himself in a situation in which the oppressors (or, rather, stand-ins for the oppressors, victims of his prejudices—John Grady and Rawlins) have fallen into his hands, within the realm of *his* authority. He occupies a unique position of power over the Americans, in other words, which alone is reason enough for him to smile. Moreover, he has led them to expose their own foolishness, since it is clear from the conversation with Rawlins that the cowboys could be making more money doing the same work in the United States. The captain, then, will not miss the opportunity to release his frustrations about the sorry economic conditions which define his own daily existence by displacing his indignation towards America onto the two naïve white adolescents who have wandered so unwittingly across the border, forsaking the American privilege that has come directly at the expense of . Indeed, he *does not* miss that opportunity: No answer that Rawlins can give the captain is good enough in the end; he and his men beat Rawlins regardless.

II. Mexico as Mythic Space

What the interrogation scene ultimately points to, then, is the irreconcilable clashing of disparate realities, a motif that pervades the entire *Trilogy*. For John Grady and Rawlins, Mexico represents the possibility of *escape* from the persecution and traumas of modernity, forces which have dispossessed John Grady of his ranch and fenced-off the American frontier. For the captain, Mexico is the *victim* of persecution, its persecutor, of course, being its neighbor, America.

Indeed, the captain cannot (or does not want) to understand their reason for being in Mexico in the first place, especially given that Rawlins' excuse that they had "come down here to work" has lost its viability, since it is made clear that more money could be made doing the same ranch-work in the United States. He can only fall back on his own stereotypes, assuming that the boys are just trigger-happy American cowboys who have come to murder and loot under the presumption of impunity. He asks Rawlins, "What is the number of horses you steal?" and "What is the number of men you kill?" (Horses 165).

To deepen our understanding of this conflict which, I have said, is pervasive, we can also turn to *The Crossing,* in an encounter between the hacendado and Billy, direct counterparts, in this instance, of the captain and John Grady, respectively:

> Hacendado: You think that this country is some country you can come here and do what you like.
> Billy: I never thought that. I never thought about this country one way or the other.
> Hacendado: Yes.
> Billy: We was just passin through. We wasnt botherin nobody. Queríamos pasar, no más.
> Hacendado: Pasar o traspasar? (119).

The exchange echoes or parallels the interrogation scene almost exactly: The interlocutors both harbor very different perceptions (or, as I will argue in the case of John Grady and Billy, misperceptions) of Mexico.

We get a good view of Rawlins and John Grady's mental maps of Mexico when we see that they are informed, at least partially, by "an oilcompany roadmap that Rawlins... picked up at [a] cafe" at the onset of *All the Pretty Horses,* in a scene which recalls a classic map-reading

moment in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness,* where Marlowe remembers the blank maps of the Congo basin that he saw in his youth—another modernist pastiche: "[Rawlins] looked at it and he looked south toward the gap in the low hills. There were roads and rivers and towns on the American side of the map as far south as the Rio Grande and beyond that all was white." After consulting this map and a few others, Rawlins merely spits on the ground and concludes decisively that "there aint shit down there" (34). Mexico exists, quite literally, as a huge blank space in the cowboys' spatial imaginaries. It exists, furthermore, not so much as a place as it does an ideal in this imaginary; it is an unreal space of dream-projection which promises—*always* promises, but never fulfills—the realization of an impossible fantasy; what this all points to, in other words, is that Mexico signifies, for McCarthy's cowboys, the mythic *frontier* itself.

McCarthy's cowboys are rather strange figurations of the cowboy archetype, in that they themselves are as much a *product* of the American national mythology as they are the propagators of it. John Grady and Billy, in other words, are *not* the hardened, solitary cowboys of the mythic past, for it is understood that such men were born in an era that has long since passed—if, indeed, that era had existed at all. The novels point explicitly to this disparity many times, and they even point, interestingly enough, to the characters' self-awareness of the disparity. In *Cities of the Plain,* when John Grady and Billy are out investigating the dead calf, tracking the animal that killed it, the two share this exchange:

> Billy: Range riders.
> John Grady: Range riders.
> Billy: Detectives.
> John Grady: Pinkertons (155).

They are referring, of course, to themselves; in attempting to assign a name to the role they are

playing, they betray a sense of awareness about their position *as role-players*—they are not the real thing, they are *mimetic* of the thing, and they know this. It is also worth mentioning that, historically, the Pinkerton private detective agency was often called upon for help in suppressing union activity and labor unrest in the the West of the late-19th and early-20th centuries. The Pinkertons were glamorized in the popular press, which explains Billy and John Grady's mention of them, but on the real frontier they would have been feared and hated by workers such as themselves—a reality of which they are either unaware or do not consider. *The Border Trilogy,* then,is not actually about "cowboys" but instead about teenage boys whose heads are filled with vague, idealistic notions of the "frontier" and "the West" as perpetuated by American popular culture; indeed, it becomes clear that they have seen the same movies and read the same books to which we ourselves (the readers) have access.

Having now established that John Grady and Billy's misperceptions of Mexico are informed by myth, I now think it useful to draw on Roland Barthes's *Mythologies*—particularly the methodological section which details myth as it functions in the postmodern world—for a working definition of myth that will guide the rest of this analysis. In myth there are two semiological systems at work, two *signs* (for Barthes, the unification of the signifier-signified constitutes one "sign"), of which myth is the *second-order system*. The first-order systemis a meaning, which is to say that it is characterized by a wholeness and a richness, a totality: "It postulates a kind of knowledge, a past, a memory, a comparative order of facts, ideas, decisions," as well as "a history, a geography, a morality, a zoology, a literature" (Barthes 116). It is this meaning,the first sign in its entirety,which becomes the signifier for the second-order system—again, the system on the plane of myth itself. What constitutes *meaning* in the first system becomes the mere *form,* or the signifierfor the second system; as such, myth presents itself

ambiguously, as both *meaning* and *form.* And when this meaning (defined, as I said, by a depth and richness, a history, a totality) becomes form, it undergoes an impovershment: "The meaning leaves its contingency behind" and "history evaporates" (Barthes 116). The essential point, however, is that the meaning does not disappear in the translation to the mythological system; it merely recedes to the background. In the translation to myth,

> one believes that the meaning is going to die, but it is a death with reprieve; the meaning loses its value, but keeps its life, from which the form of the myth will draw its nourishment. The meaning will be for the form like an instantaneous reserve of history, a tamed richness, which it is possible to call and dismiss in a sort of rapid alternation: the form must constantly be able to be rooted again in the meaning and to get there what nature it needs for its nutriment; above all, it must be able to hide there (117).

Meaning, then, and the rich, complex historical processes and contingencies that have conspired over time to construct it, is at once present and absent in the myth; it is always on-call, always waiting close at hand.

On the plane of myth, Barthes calls the signified the *concept*: First, a single concept can have many signifiers, such that the concept assumes a global, all-encompassing presence. Second, this concept *always* corresponds to a specific function—that is, whatever function, whatever agenda the myth is being deployed to serve: "The concept reconstitutes a chain of causes and effects, motives and intentions" (Barthes 117). At the end of this "chain," there is always this final common denominator: The intention of every myth is, ultimately, to mask its own intention by naturalizing it. Indeed, the intention or agenda behind the myth is somehow always "frozen, purified, eternalized, *made absent":* "At the moment of reaching me," Barthes says, "[the myth] suspends itself, turns away and assumes the look of a generality: it stiffens, it

makes itself look neutral and innocent" (122-24). This, in fact, is the premier function of myth itself: the transformation of history into nature. Myth, in other words, takes historical processes and historical contingencies and, far from concealing them, makes them look natural or inevitable.

At this point, I return to the question of Mexico in *The Border Trilogy,* drawing on Barthes's methodology. First, we may consider "Mexico" as a totality, as a full and rich *meaning:* A nation-state, a geography, a people, a history (some of which we have discussed in this chapter's previous section). This totality is the first-order sign that becomes appropriated by myth: Mexico as signifier (as linguistic unit) and as signified (as full meaning). In the translation to second-order sign, then, this whole system becomes reduced to signifier and, thus impoverished in this way, is now prepared to receive its new signified. This signified, this concept, is the very (mis)perception of Mexico that fuels the motivations of McCarthy's cowboys. This mythological process of impoverishment to which the signifier is subjected—this *emptying,* in other words—actually becomes literalized by the signified in this case: Emptiness *is* Mexico; emptinessis its defining trait. Indeed, this is the myth of the frontier itself, signaling the promise of escape from the oppressive and bewildering atmosphere of the capitalist metropolis: The myth of a wilderness, of an empty space, literalized by such apparatuses as Rawlins' oil-company maps in the above scene.

Under the influence of myth, then, Mexico's full history is occluded, put at a distance; it is *presumed,* but John Grady and Billy are woefully ignorant of it, and it is this fact that leads to these irreconcilable, often disastrous clashes between the outsider-cowboys and the various Mexican nationals they encounter. The myth becomes especially relevant when considering the colonial (or, indeed, neocolonial) aspect of Mexico's history. We note, importantly, that

Mexico's rural emptiness is rooted in recognizable material processes—that of geographically uneven development, in particular. The two cowboys cannot seem to recognize this fact; instead, they are dismissive, if not rather contemptuous, of Mexico's underdeveloped qualities. When Rawlins and John Grady first cross into Mexico, for example, they remark upon the missing signs of industrialization:

> Rawlins: There aint no electricity here.
> John Grady: I doubt there's ever even been a car here (Horses 51).

We have already seen how the United States' unprecedented postwar economic boom and consolidation of global hegemony came directly at the cost of Mexico's own prospects for development—that, in fact, America's success *hinged* upon Mexico's economic subordination. Myth, however, distorts this history, as in the above exchange: It inhibits McCarthy's cowboys' ability to draw connections, to see Mexico's underdevelopment and poverty as the result of specific historical contingencies, contingencies which they themselves, as Americans, may in some way even be implicated. Rather, underdevelopment is naturalized, goes unquestioned, and is taken to be matter-of-fact.

III. Bourgeois Ideology as a Nightmare from which One Cannot Awake

"The order which the righteous seek is never righteousness itself, but is only order."

The Blind Man
The Crossing

Barthes's conception of mythology is inextricably tied to ideology, in the Althusserian sense of the word: A subject's imaginary set of relations to his real conditions of existence. For Barthes,

the second-order signified of myth, defined by its intention, *is* ideological; the mythological signified is an ideological unit of meaning. Myth, in other words, always corresponds to an ideology. In order to engage this notion with respect to the *Trilogy,* I think it useful to consider the hacienda in *All the Pretty Horses.* First we note the way the hacienda presents itself upon first sight:

> In the evening of that day from the crest of the cordilleras they saw below them the country of which they'd been told. The grasslands lay in a deep violet haze and to the west thin flights of waterfowl were moving north before the sunset in the deep red galleries under the cloudbanks like schoolfish in a burning sea and on the foreland plain they saw vaqueros driving cattle before them through a gauze of golden dust (93).

It is an idyllic scene to the point, almost, of being unreal; as such, we are seeing the hacienda as John Grady sees it. For John Grady, the hacienda signals a kind of freedom; the opportunity to actualize the type of lifestyle he so idealizes: the life of a cowboy, the life of a ranch-hand.

This becomes problematic, however, as soon as we consider what the hacienda represents in reality.The hacienda typifies (we may even say that it is a kind of prototype of) capitalist social-relations and land ownership; the smooth-functioning of the hacienda system presupposes "ties between social and economic unequals," meaning, in other words, the codification of a rigid social hierarchy (Keith 37). Indeed, shortly after John Grady and Rawlins arrive, we are quickly made aware of some implicit hierarchy at work through the titles of some of the more minor characters on the hacienda: For instance, the "gerente," the "caporal," and the "hacendado." This system, moreover, can even be said to go beyond hierarchical; the hacienda is visibly *patriarchal* by nature—the hacendado is always unequivocally at the top of the pecking-order; the literal

pater familias. In light of this, it certainly seems strange that John Grady equates the hacienda to personal freedom, given that, as a ranch-hand, he will occupy the lowest tier of this hierarchy; given that the hacienda is, after all, a classic manifestation of the tenet *accumulation by dispossession,* wherein those who work the land are fully dispossessed of the land itself and thus of the product that is born of their labor.

Here, then, we see myth at work: John Grady projects his own mythic fantasies onto the landscape of the hacienda, while effectively knowing nothing of the complexities that underlie it, of the specific history or cultural traditions with which the land is endowed. That being said, he *is* treated with a degree of privilege relative to the other workers because of his innate and unmatched knowledge of horses, which facilitates a unique interpersonal relationship between himself and the hacendado—an unusual dynamic between landowner and worker. As such, John Grady's situation only corroborates the classic sense of American exceptionalism that the myth of the frontier underwrites ideologically. Indeed, it is an ideology dating all the way back to America's origins as settler-state, perceiving itself as a shining "City upon a Hill," a phrase coined by John Winthrop in the 17th century and revived at numerous points throughout the 20th century by the likes of Presidents Kennedy and Reagan, to name a few notable examples. John Grady's fatal mistake, however, is his failure to see the limits of this felt sense of American exceptionalism. There is, in fact, a line, and that line is drawn with the hacendado's daughter, Alejandra. John Grady, in other words, fails to understand the deeply-entrenched, rigid nature of the Mexican caste system and Mexican patriarchy; he does not see that his privilege on the hacienda is only allowed insofar as it is *profitable* to the hacendado in making well-informed horse purchases. A secret tryst between his daughter and a wandering, propertyless expatriate—a lowly, itinerant ranch-hand—becomes a threat to the hacendado's reputation and thus to the

hacienda's greater financial prospects: "Only by maintaining the good name of his family, and by underlining its social status through conspicuous consumption, can the hacienda owner hope to convince the lenders of capital of his economic viability" (Keith 38). Indeed, once the hacendado gets word of the affair, Alejandra is sent away to Mexico City, and John Grady and Rawlins are both escorted off the hacienda at gunpoint by Mexican authorities.

The Dueña Alfonsa, Alejandra's great-aunt and godmother, stands in as the repository of Mexican historical memory in the novel, whose long narratorial digressions detailing certain aspects of Mexican history and custom merely points to John Grady's complete ignorance regarding such matters. She warns him that "what Alejandra dismisses as a matter of mere appearance or outmoded custom"—sexual transgressions across class lines in Mexico, in other words—"have consequences in the real world and they can be very grave indeed. They can be consequences of a gravity not excluding bloodshed. Not excluding death" (Horses 136). Still the myth and its suspension of history and cultural tradition—in spite of the Dueña's Alfonsa's ominous forebodings—compels John Grady to act outside of his own interests, as if he cannot help himself, by producing an ideology, a set of imagined relations to his real conditions of existence, that of his privilege and American exceptionalism, elevated above the status of another worker. Herein lies the ideological component of the myth: In the last instance, those privileges and exceptions are proven to have been a mere figment of his imagination; the Mexican class-hierarchy prevails.

These characters cling to the myth through to the *Trilogy's* conclusion with a tragic conviction, even when they have every reason to be disillusioned with it. The opening of *Cities of the Plain,* for example, sees both John Grady and Billy in a truck, with Billy saying to his fellow passenger: "Daybreak to backbreak for a godgiven dollar... I love this life. You love this

life, son? I love this life. You do love this life dont you? Cause by god I love it. Just love it" (10). Noting the repetition, we understand that it is not the case that Billy "loves" this life, only, rather, that he is trying to *convince* himself of it through repetition. The myth and the cowboy lifestyle it idealizes, in other words, has not lived up to its promise in actuality; they work "daybreak to backbreak" for very little pay. Indeed, Billy says later on in the novel that "I used to think rawhidin a bunch of bony cattle in some outland country would be just as close to heaven as a man could get. I wouldnt give you much for it now" (Cities 77). The myth of the cowboy, in fact, has only committed them to a kind of subsistence lifestyle (embodying the logic of flexible-accumulative labor, see Ch. 1), always on the lower-tier and always at the mercy of the ebb and flow of global economic tides. My main point, here, is that the myth has *led them to believethat this disenfranchised life of poverty is the life they desired.*

This, then, is is the main function of ideology: It ultimately compels the subject to acquiesce in his own economic and social subordination. In the case of McCarthy's cowboys, the liberal-bourgeois notions of individual liberty and entitlement (the very notions that the myth of the frontier narrativizes) have been flipped on their heads, not to facilitate upward economic mobility and "progress" but to ensure, instead, these characters' resignation to a life of total exclusion from the means of production. Indeed, as Barthes says,

> the bourgeoisie is constantly absorbing into its ideology a whole section of humanity which does not have its basic status and cannot live up to it except in imagination, that is, at the cost of an immobilization and an impoverishment of consciousness. By spreading its representations over a while catalogue of collective images for petit-bourgeois use, the bourgeoisie countenances the illusory lack of differentiation of the social classes (140).

This "section of humanity" that Barthes describes corresponds with John Grady and Billy, though the two cowboys cannot even be said to qualify for "petite-bourgeois" status; they are proletarians, plain and simple, which speaks to just how pervasive this bourgeois ideology is: Not only does it reach those who do not possess the "basic status" of bourgeoisie, it reaches those who are the absolute *farthest away* from that status. McCarthy's cowboys, in other words, are victims of false consciousness who, time and again, act against their own self-interest because of their attachment to this myth which offers them nothing, since it merely "borrows" (Barthes 138) from a bourgeois sensibility and lifestyle from which, at the low-end of the social stratum, they are ultimately excluded.

It is through this dissemination of bourgeois ideology—to the extent that it becomes ubiquitous and "our society [becomes] the privileged field of mythical significations"—that the bourgeois, according to Barthes, "ex-nominates" itself (137). In 21st-century America, for example, the global economic elites do not wish to be tied to the reputation which the name "bourgeois" implies: Bill Gates, for example, wishes instead to be conceived (and, indeed, *is* conceived) as a kind of capitalist-philanthropist (Žižek calls them "liberal-communists"), thus completely evading any critique or consideration of the way he is implicated in global economic exploitation by foregrounding this humanitarian image. This "humanitarian mask," as Žižek calls it, *is* an ideology in itself, wherein the "ruthless pursuit of profit is counteracted by charity" (22). Bill Gates-as-philanthropist, in other words, is an *imaginary* relation; his *real* relation to existence signals the rather "sad predicament" of late capitalism, in that "it cannot reproduce itself on its own"; instead it "needs extra-economic charity to sustain the cycle of social reproduction" (24).

So, too, this dissemination of bourgeois ideology is also the way in which *capitalism* as a

system ex-nominates itself in the *Trilogy*. Here, then, we arrive at the answer to my question at the end of Chapter 2: Why the tragic sense of futility, resignation, and defeat that pervades the *Trilogy,* as opposed to indignation against (or just plain *recognition of)* the system that creates the conditions for these tragedies to occur? I propose that it is because of the very naturalizing effect of myth achieved by the inexorable dissemination of bourgeois ideology. The objective violence of capital as a nameable, systemic, and material process, as well as its destabilizing effects—the fuel that drives all major conflicts in the novel, as I established in Chapter 2—instead becomes "the way of the world," so to speak; it becomes inevitable, irreconcilable. Indeed, the only explanation for John Grady's misfortune—his critical dispossession, the *literalization* of capital's objective violence—is offered by the family lawyer who tells him resignedly: "Some things in this world cant be helped... And I believe this is probably one of them" (Horses 18). Here we see that the loss of the Cole ranch, rather than being the result of specific historical contingencies in the postwar economic world-system, is reduced to a natural process; it is de-politicized; it is *just the way things are.*

Our society is one in which the myth comes to inform the reality, to the point that our only recourse in attempting to describe, represent, and make sense of events is to *borrow* from bourgeois ideological apparatuses, myth being an important one among them. To my mind, then, the implication of such a world—one so completely saturated with mythic significations—is that we are all, in some way, sleepwalking through an ideological dreamscape. The dream, however, *is not our own,* since we, as Barthes reminds us, do not possess the "basic status" of *bourgeoisie.* The implication, in other words, is that we are not merely *dreaming;* we ourselves *are* the dream. As such, we come to consider the possibility that *we ourselves are but projections of bourgeois*

imagination, since we have no viable claim on the reality that is presented to us—ideology is blanketed over everything like a veil that keeps us from accessing the *true* nature of reality. Indeed, it is this very problematic with which Billy and the mysterious hobo under the highway are grappling in the *Trilogy's* baffling, short-circuiting epilogue: the "realization that all knowledge is a borrowing and every fact a debt" (Cities 274). The hobo tells Billy of a dream he once had, about a nameless traveler in the mountains who falls asleep and subsequently has a dream of his own, a dream to which the hobo-dreamer also has access, thus calling into question to whom this dream-within-a-dream belongs, the dreaming hobo or the dreamt traveler. To me, this paradox that the hobo's story invokes seems a kind of allegory for ideology itself, following its logic almost exactly: When we are steeped in ideology, we are in this "dream inside a dream" which "might not be a dream" (Cities 273) at all; indeed, this dream comes to constitute our very waking (sleeping) reality.

With this in mind, I may now return to Chapter 1 of this analysis, which explored the *Trilogy's* unconcealed, self-consciously cinematographic nature. This comes as no surprise, now, when we consider that films themselves are one of the main methods by which the myth of the West—and, by extension, the bourgeois ideology underlying the myth—is disseminated and perpetuated. In this way, films become projections of bourgeois imagination, to the full extent that we take the myth home with us after viewing, and it comes to interject itself into our own perceptions of reality. Indeed, the viewing experience in the movie theater itself facilitates this phenomenon; the dimmed lights, the surround-sound, the huge screen—they all conspire to create a situation in which reality is wholly suspended for a few hours. As such, the movie theater is perhaps the space in which we are most *purely* insideideology.

Thus we have a final explanation for *The Border Trilogy's* distinctively dream-like, cinematographic world: The characters who navigate the world of the novels are sleepwalking through an ideological dreamscape. Indeed, the *Trilogy* is book-ended by two mentions of sleep: On the one end, we have John Grady who is looking at his dead grandfather and thinking, "That [is] not sleeping. That [is] not sleeping" (Horses 3). On the other end, we have the unnamed woman talking to Billy: "You go to sleep now. I'll see you in the morning" (Cities 292). The two quotes conspire to call into question who is sleeping and who is not; and we arrive at the rather sad, if rather chilling notion that perhaps the characters are, in some way, asleep the entire time.

Conclusion

I. Summations

In Chapter 1, I considered the position of *The Border Trilogy* within the larger American Western genre, particularly with respect to film, establishing the *Trilogy* as counternarrative to the Western's mythic conventions which often obscure the harsh realities of conquest, of violence and dispossession. Through further exploration, it becomes clear that McCarthy's cinematographic prose—the effect of which is that the characters seem to inhabit a kind of filmic world, subject to the laws of cinematography—signals something beyond just a mere instance of postmodern self-awareness. Indeed, his cinematographic prose also invites a consideration of ideology, and how the film industry serves to reproduce and disseminate the bourgeois ideology that so underpins the standard myth of the West. This ideology is pervasive to the extent that it comes to inform our perceptions of reality, just as it does the characters' in *The Border Trilogy*—often at the cost of a lot of false consciousness—and herein lies an explanation for the 'cinematic' world these characters inhabit: Reality is cinematic; thus, reality is *ideological.*

In Chapter 2, I zeroed-in on the spatial dimensions of the *Trilogy,* and it is here that Harvey's theory of *time–space compression*—which I have said, to some extent, underlies the entire project—is laid most bare, at least as it pertains specifically to McCarthy's work. I argued that the space of *The Border Trilogy* resembles the 'grid,' a postmodern conception of space wherein the world's geographies are flattened to facilitate the elusive movements of global capital, such that the subject cannot hope to orient himself in, or navigate through, space effectively. This notion of the 'grid' is essentially synonymous with time–space compression, or the annihilation of time and space by the incomprehensible speed of capital flows. Thus we have seen how postmodern conceptions of time and space have permeated the narrative of McCarthy's

Trilogy. Also tied inextricably to this conception of space is the notion of *objective violence,* or the non-agential violence inherent in capital—a type of violence which I have argued is foregrounded in the novels, exemplified by bullets seemingly fired by no one and by the phenomenon of dispossession itself.

Chapter 3 investigated the workings of myth in the narrative, particularly as it affects the characters' perceptions of Mexico. By drawing on the definition of myth as it was theorized by Roland Barthes, I argued that Mexico exists as *mythic space* in the characters' spatial imaginaries, defined solely by its 'emptiness,' which myth serves essentialize or naturalize. In doing so, it obscures the *historically contingent* nature of that very emptiness, which can be attributed materially to the processes of geographically uneven development, and even to the exploitative neocolonial practices of the United States, who benefited directly from Mexico's being kept in relative poverty throughout the 20th century. Myth distorts these kinds of material realities for John Grady and Billy. So, too, and imperatively, it distorts capital's objective violence as a nameableprocess, such that the dispossession and exploitation that the characters *themselves* undergo become naturalized as inevitabilities, or 'the way of the world.' Myth, and the ideology that underlies it, in other words, causes them to accept their own economic oppression.

II. Prospects for Further Research

There is but one avenue of potentiality for further research that I would like to address, which revealed itself to me about halfway through the production process of what is laid out here; by then I had traveled too far in one direction to turn back. I was intrigued by the inherently homosocial quality of the cowboy world, or how the world that these cowboys inhabit is

characterized chiefly by *male-to-male* social relations. In light of this, an analysis of sexuality—even opening the *Trilogy* up to queer studies, perhaps—would, I think, yield particularly interesting and rewarding results, especially with respect to the character Billy Parham. It struck me as strange that Billy, in stark contrast to John Grady Cole—hypermasculine, heterosexual, love-stricken to a fatally problematic degree—never once in his life falls in love. In fact, it is wholly ambiguous as to whether or not he ever has sex at all throughout *The Crossing* or *Cities of the Plain,* which give the reader a full view, effectively, of his entire life.

There are two sexually-driven scenes in *The Crossing* in which Billy is involved, but, strangely enough, it is *sex* itself that is missing from these scenes: As a young teenager, he watches the primadonna from the traveling circus bathing naked in the river at a distance, and we are made to understand that this experience, somehow, has a profound effect on his life. The significance of this, however, is still unclear to me, and the narration does little in the way of explanation. Later on in the story, he has a more direct exchange with a kind Mexican woman who expresses interest in Billy, flirting with him, making subtle passes at him through suggestive conversation. Billy reciprocates at first—though seemingly halfhearted about it—and, in the end, he tells her that he has to be on his way. They are two very strange exchanges, the implications of which I would like to see explored more thoroughly through a kind of queer-studies lens.

The part that *really* interests me, though, is that the closest we get to a view of Billy's sexuality is in the brothel at the beginning of *Cities of the Plain,* wherein Billy leaves the bar for a while and then comes back, the implication being that *maybe* he was with one of the prostitutes lounging around the bar. If we go with the assumption that he was, then this gives rise to the question of money in sexual exchanges. What, in other words, can the *Trilogy,* through the character Billy,reveal to us about the possibilities of love and sex in a capitalist economy? A

blend of Marxist and queer studies of this sort would, I think, yield seriously rewarding results, and it is a question that I would to see further explored going into the future.

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